Report Suggests CIA Involvement In Fla. Illnesses

By Bill Richards
Washington Post Staff Writer

The CIA may have conducted open-air tests of whooping cough bacteria in Florida in the mid-1950s, when state medical records show a whooping cough outbreak killed 12 persons, according to a Church of Scientology analysis of agency records.

The Scientologists said their examination of about 150 pages of financial records released in recent years by the Central Intelligence Agency indicates that the agency conducted at least one open-air biological test along Florida's Gulf Coast in 1955.

In a report the Scientologists are scheduled to make public today, the group said the CIA documents show that shortly before the test someone in the agency signed out a specimen of whooping cough bacteria known as Hemophilus pertussis from the Army's biological warfare center at Fort Detrick, Md.

The bacteria apparently was used in tests conducted around the Tampa Bay area near Sebring, Fla., according to the Scientologists' report.

State medical records examined by the group show that the number of whooping cough cases recorded in Florida jumped from 339 and one death in 1954 to 1,080 and 12 deaths in 1955. A spokesman for the Scientologists said one of three areas that experienced a sharp increase in 1955 was the Tampa Bay area.

"It is our hope that the outbreak and the testing is a mere coincidence," the Scientologists said.

A spokesman for the CIA said the agency would have no comment on the report.

American Citizens for Honesty in Government, a group formed by the Church of Scientology, has been active in recent months in analyzing chemical and biological testing programs run by the Army and possibly the CIA in the 1950s and 1960s.

Earlier this month the Scientologists said their analysis of financial records that were part of the CIA's MK-ULTRA testing program showed the agency conducted open air tests around New York City.

The same heavily censored records also contain fragments of information that indicate the CIA reimbursed a physcian, whose name is deleted, for $4 for the bacteria withdrawn from Fort Detrick on Jan.26, 1955.

A few days later, according to receipts from the CIA, the intelligence agency paid for pair of boots contaminated during testing. The boots were purchased in Sebring, according to copies of the receipts.

The CIA records also show reimbursements for jeeps, lumber, several test animals and long distance calls regarding security set up at "field test sites." Several other entries at the time indicate the team was testing some type of biological agent.

According to the records, several test animals were killed and buried and a "biological specimen" was shpped by air to an unnamed location by the researchers. CIA petty cash vouchers show a one-way railway ticket was purchased March 6, 1955, for $54.99. A Seaboard Railroad chart from that time indicates $54.99 was the fare from Sebring to Washington, D.C.

The Scientologists said they checked Florida State medical records and found whooping cough cases jumped 300 percent over previous years, with the highest increase recorded in July 1955.

Earlier this year, Army records indicated that a biological warfare test conducted in San Francisco in 1950 may have been responsle for the death of a hospital patient there.

Brian Anderson, a spokesman for the Scientologists, said in a statement that the evidence the group has gathered indicates a need for the release of all government biological warfare test files.

The CIA says most of its chemical and biological test files were destroyed in 1973 at the order of former CIA director Richard Helms.